

**Governor's Rural Affairs Council  
Meeting Minutes  
June 25, 2015  
Stratton Office Building, Room A-1  
Springfield, Illinois**

**1. The meeting was called to order by Lt. Governor Evelyn Sanguinetti at 11:04 a.m.**

Lt. Governor Sanguinetti welcomed the members of the GRAC and guests and stated that there would be a public comment period at the end of the meeting. She asked that anyone with public comments register with Kaitlin Kinser from her staff.

**2. Roll Call**

**Member Agencies Present**

Illinois Department on Aging, Burt Weber  
Illinois Department of Agriculture, Kristi Jones  
Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, Marty Johnson  
Illinois Department of Human Services, Randy Staton  
Illinois Department of Natural Resources, Steve Ettinger  
Illinois Department of Public Health, Don Jones  
Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, Richard Breckenridge  
Illinois Community College Board, Todd Jorns  
Illinois Housing Development Authority, Aisha Turner  
Southern Illinois University, Kim Sanders  
Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs, Christopher Merrett\*  
Illinois Finance Authority, Patrick Evans  
Rural Partners, Christopher Merrett\*

Not present: Illinois Department of Employment Security, Illinois Department of Transportation, Illinois State Board of Education, University of Illinois Extension, Illinois Agricultural Association (Illinois Farm Bureau)

**Nonvoting Members Present**

Norman Walzer, NIU  
Colleen Callahan, USDA

Not present: Heather Hampton-Knodle

Lt. Governor's Office: Susan Bence, Brian Costin, Brian Colgan, Leah Guffey, Ennedy Rivera, Allie Bovis

Guests: Patrick Buchen, Illinois State Fair; Abby Radclift, Illinois Hospital Association

Lt. Governor Sanguinetti again welcomed the attendees to the inaugural meeting of the Governor's Rural Affairs Council. She noted that some members have served in the past

---

\* Representing both organizations

and welcomed those members back. She further stated that their insights and experience was important as the Council continues to build support for initiatives and policies to improve quality of life in the rural areas in the state. Lt Governor Sanguinetti is looking forward to leading the Council and has been immersing herself in rural issues. She stated that as she has been meeting with people in all areas of the state, she has heard repeatedly that residents of downstate Illinois feel unheard by state government and policy makers. The Lt. Governor had the opportunity to officially launch the Homegrown by Heroes program, a joint initiative of the Illinois Farm Bureau and Department of Agriculture. She has also visited many agricultural businesses and farms. The Lt. Governor's Office has been involved in public safety issues, including the lack of 911 services in some rural areas.

Lt. Governor Sanguinetti asked those in attendance to introduce themselves:

- Colleen Callahan, State Director, USDA-Rural Development. USDA has \$3.5 billion loan and grant portfolio in Illinois. USDA participates in the GRAC as a nonvoting member and Director Callahan looks forward to engaging with the Council and forming partnerships to find solutions to the issues facing rural Illinois.
- Patrick Buchen, Manager, Illinois and DuQuoin State Fairs.
- Karen Poncin, Assistant Director, Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs. Ms. Poncin stated that she provides support for some GRAC projects and initiatives.
- Christopher Merrett, Director, Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs. Dr. Merrett stated that there are great people and great resource in rural Illinois and he is looking forward to working with the Council.
- Leah Guffey, Downstate Coordinator for the Lt. Governor's office
- Brian Colgan, Chief of Staff for the Lt. Governor
- Brian Costin, Director of Policy for the Lt. Governor
- Susan Bence, Legislative Liaison for the Lt. Governor
- Ennedy Rivera, General Counsel for the Lt. Governor
- Steve Ettinger, Illinois Department of Natural Resources
- Abby Radclift (representing Lori Williams), Illinois Hospital Association. Ms. Radclift works with the small and rural hospitals in Illinois.
- Kim Sanders, Director, Center for Rural Health and Social Services Development at SIU School of Medicine. Ms. Sanders is interested in impacting the barriers to health care faced by residents of rural areas.
- Burt Weber, Illinois Department on Aging. His agency provides a wide range of services to older residents in both rural and urban parts of Illinois.
- Richard Breckenridge, Agriculture and Rural Affairs Advisor, Illinois Environmental Protection Agency. The agency is committed to agriculture and rural Illinois.
- Kristi Jones, Communications Manager, Illinois Department of Agriculture. The Department is both a regulator of agriculture and a marketer of Illinois agricultural products.
- Aisha Turner (representing Bill Pluta), Illinois Housing Development Authority. Ms. Turner is looking forward to serving on the Council and collaborating with the other members to address rural housing issues.

- Patrick Evans, Illinois Finance Authority. The Authority provides indirect loans to farmers through banks, health-safety and education bonds, and manufacturing bonds.
- Marty Johnson (representing Heidi Brown McCreedy), Research Economist for the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity. The Department is working to create businesses and bring jobs to Illinois. Ms. Johnson has had the opportunity to sit on the Enterprise Zone Board and review applications from communities.
- Norman Walzer, Northern Illinois University. He reported that he has been working on rural issues for about 45 year. He spent 35 years at Western Illinois University and founded the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs.
- Don Jones, Illinois Department of Public Health. Mr. Jones works in the Center for Rural Health and works on workforce development to recruit and retain health care providers in rural and underserved areas through loan repayment programs and scholarship programs.
- Randy Staton, Assistant Bureau Chief, Division of Rehab Services, Department of Human Services. Mr. Staton administers programs in Regions 4 and 5 which cover a large section of downstate Illinois.
- Todd Jorns (representing Karen Hunter Anderson), Illinois Community College Board

**3. Approval of Minutes of the November 18, 2014. Governor's Rural Affairs Council meeting.** Motion to approve by Norman Walzer/Seconded by Christopher Merrett/Motion Carried.

**4. Presentation: State of Rural Affairs: How did we get here and how are we going? Christopher Merrett.**

People usually think of Chicago when they think about Illinois but the state is much more complex with diverse geography, economy, and population. Rural areas of the state differ from more urban areas in that:

- While the population of Illinois has grown slowly, most of this growth has occurred in urban counties. Many rural counties have been losing population for decades. The population of rural counties is also older than that of urban counties.
- Residents of rural counties are paid lower wages on average than those in urban counties and experience higher unemployment and lower educational attainment.
- Other issues that differ in rural counties include:
  - Access to health care,
  - Access to broadband,
  - K-12 funding,
  - Crime,
  - Longevity, and
  - Access to public transit.

Of the 102 counties in Illinois, 66 are defined as nonmetro according to the Office of Management and Budget. There are 1,657,000 people in nonmetro counties and this is more people than live in 12 states.

Another way to classify counties is to use USDA's Rural-Urban Continuum Codes (RUCCs). When population shifts are examined using this framework, the largest population growth in Illinois has happened along the I74 corridor, followed by the Metro Chicago area, which is followed by the Metro-East region. The population of several rural counties peaked in the early 1900s.

Living in Illinois' rural counties also appears to have an impact on the health and longevity of residents. Many rural people have life expectancies shorter than the national average. Male residents of Iowa and Wisconsin live longer than rural males in Illinois.

Agriculture, while still important to the rural economy, does not dominate it like it once did. In 2014, approximately 4.6 percent of people employed in rural Illinois counties were employed in agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting, and mining. In contrast, 25 percent were employed in educational services, health care, and social assistance and 21 percent were employed in transportation, warehousing, and utilities. An additional 14 percent were employed in manufacturing and 12 percent were employed in retail trade.

Dr. Merrett summarized the trends that have led to the issues facing rural Illinois today and some potential strategies for the future. These include the following:

- Issues
  - Depopulation – agricultural technology, youth outmigration
  - Deindustrialization – competition from other areas, technology displaces workers
  - K-12 Education – declining rural base, declining population, declining state support
  - Health Care Issues – health insurance, role of critical access hospitals
  - Job Creation and Economic Development – lack of start-up capital, entrepreneurship, inadequate BR&E strategies
- Strategies
  - Youth Outmigration – Youth entrepreneurship
  - Rural Reindustrialization – identify competitive advantages
  - Rural K-12 Education – Funding reforms, technology-infused curriculum, broadband accessibility
  - Rural Health Care – Community health outreach
  - Rural Job Creation and Economic Development – entrepreneurship training, alternative business models
  - Rural Community Development – Strategic visioning for rural places, leadership development, community foundations, empower rural communities.

Dr. Merrett concluded that the GRAC should decide what issues are important and identify strategies to endorse. GRAC members can form partnerships to work on issues and find solutions.

Lt. Governor Sanguinetti asked Dr. Merrett to explain the work of Accion to the Council. Accion is a micro-lender that has been working with the Small Business Development Center at Western Illinois University to provide loans to small businesses in west central Illinois. Dr. Merrett explained that large lenders, such as banks, find that making large loans is more cost efficient. Small microenterprises often do not need large loans but are only looking for small amounts of start-up capital. Accion makes small loans to nontraditional borrowers (borrowers with low income, low credit score, no collateral). Accion has been able to assist several small businesses in rural areas. Dr. Merrett mentioned that this is a model that may be useful in other rural areas of the state.

The CEO (Creating Entrepreneurial Opportunities) is another program that enhances entrepreneurship. In this program business leaders mentor young people and help them develop entrepreneurial skills and start businesses. This program is very active in the Effingham area.

Norman Walzer mentioned that he and Christopher Merrett had recently been in Vermont at a meeting that focused on the trend of young adults who are returning to small communities. There are several strategies that communities can adopt to take advantage of this trend.

Richard Breckenridge stated that there are 1,020 communities with populations of less than 5,000 and 15 counties with populations of less than 15,000. He stated that IEPA is aware that there is a different decision-making process in these sparsely populated rural areas. It is more difficult for government units to pay for infrastructure upgrades and it is important to direct some resources to rural areas.

Burt Weber asked about initiatives that brought together the generations as a way to enhance the quality of life in rural areas.

Christopher Merrett mentioned an article in the New York Times that describes a retirement community that housed a preschool. The children were cared for and the senior citizens were reenergized from their interaction with the children.

Lt. Governor Sanguinetti asked what role technology played in rural communities in bridging the gap in education.

Dr. Merrett stated that technology was a double-edge sword in rural communities. There is a benefit to increased technology in the classroom. For example, many schools have introduced iPads. This requires training for teachers and planning for replacements. The challenge for rural communities is often broadband accessibility. This was brought home to Dr. Merrett with the implementation of the PARC testing. The PARC texts are designed to be taken online. This has been a struggle for some rural districts. Access to

technology in rural areas continues to need to be addressed. Technology can expand access and enhance education in rural areas.

## **5. Illinois State Farm Update**

Lt. Governor Sanguinetti introduced Patrick Buchen, State Fair Manager. Mr. Buchen reported that he is the first state fair manager to come from a farming background. He was named manager of both the Illinois State Fair and the DuQuoin State Fair. He stated that the State Fair will feature agriculture more prominently and will have a stronger emphasis on youth this year. Several youth events will be moved to make them more visible; the Grand Champion competition and the Sale of Grand Champion will be moved to the Coliseum.

Mr. Buchen stated that the future of the State Fair revolves around what happens in the facilities the other 355 days a year. While the facilities cannot compete with concert venues and amusement parks, he is exploring ways to use the facilities while emphasizing agriculture throughout the year.

Mr. Buchen mentioned that the Fair is cost effective. It maintains the State's investment in the fair grounds and generates tax revenue.

He stated that he is working to overcome the geographic challenges of having two fairs. His team is spending a lot of time in DuQuoin to ensure that their needs are met. He mentioned that there is a lot of synergy and efficiencies that come from combining the management of the two fairs.

Christopher Merrett asked if there have ever been an economic impact study done on the State Fair. Mr. Buchen stated that there had and that the impact is significant, \$85 million each year. Kristi Jones stated that the most recent economic impact study was done in 2013.

## **6. Member Updates and Reports**

*Todd Jorns, Illinois Community College Board*, updated the Council on ICCB's Strategic Plan on Workforce and Education. The plan focuses on strengthening system-wide visibility and impact by aligning workforce education and training to ensure economic competitiveness, strengthen business and industry relationships, maximize employer engagement, and develop relevant programs with good wages and career paths. There were a series of 10 regional forums to gather input from stakeholders throughout the state. Next steps in the process include the review of the reports of the regional forums, outline common themes, and develop a plan. This work should be completed by September 2015.

*Kim Sanders, Southern Illinois University*, mentioned that a few years ago the SIU School of Medicine added Service to the Community to its mission and created the Office of Community Health and Service. The new office has established two regional outreach

offices in Havana and Mattoon. The Center for Rural Health and Social Service serves as the third regional office in Carbondale. The goal of these offices is to bring the services of the University to the communities and positively enhance the health and wellbeing of the residents.

*Abby Radclift, Illinois Hospital Association*, stated that the Association is working with its 86 small rural hospitals to develop new delivery systems, quality measures, and sustainable financing mechanisms for small and rural hospitals.

*Kristi Jones, Illinois Department of Agriculture*, stated that the Department has started a monthly newsletter, *Common Ground* which reports on news in agriculture around the state. She asked the Council members to submit stories of interest to her.

*Richard Breckenridge, Illinois Environmental Protection Agency*, reported on the Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy, a voluntary initiative that assists farmers and municipalities to identify strategies that prevent nutrient loss from farm fields, etc. This is a collaborative effort of IEPA, Illinois Department of Agriculture, Farm Bureau, Corn Growers, etc.

Lt. Governor Sanguinetti asked the Council members to contact Susan Bence, Legislative Liaison, with any issues that the GRAC should address.

## **7. Public Comments**

Lt. Governor Sanguinetti asked for a motion to limit public comments to three minutes per person. Motion by Kim Sanders/Seconded by Burt Weber/Motion Carried.

Lt. Governor Sanguinetti opened the floor to public comment. There were no public comments.

## **8. Calendar Items**

Illinois State Fair – August 13 – 23, 2015  
DuQuoin State Fair – August 28 – September 7, 2014  
Farm Progress Show – September 1 – 3, 2015  
Next GRAC meeting – September 24, 2015

## **9. Adjournment**

Lt. Governor Sanguinetti thanked the group for its attendance. The Governor's Rural Affairs Council adjourned at 12:38 p.m.

Respectfully submitted: Karen Poncin, Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs